

collegiate learning assessment



CLA IN CONTEXT

A MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT



A liberal arts school I will call here “Sunny Glen College” was one of the first participants in the CLA. With its campuswide academic ethos that provides students with opportunities and expectations to pursue independent study and to engage in individual research, and with both efforts guided by extensive faculty advising, Sunny Glen seemed like an ideal candidate for the CLA. Additionally, its much-heralded campus philosophy is to create a culture that promotes the kinds of skill development measured by the CLA (critical thinking, analytic reasoning, problem solving, and written communication).

After participating in the CLA, campus administrators were perplexed to find that their students performed at levels far lower than expected when compared to other liberal arts colleges. The initial reaction of the Sunny Glen College administrators was a bit defensive: they wanted to learn more about the CLA and to ensure the validity and reliability of our measures. However, after they reviewed the additional information we provided and following numerous discussions we held with the staff, the administration concluded that the CLA measures were solid, and that they instead would need to consider the meaning of the results.

Campus administrators first shared the results with the faculty and engaged them in a conversation to identify causal mechanisms that might explain the disparity between their expectations and the

actual assessment results. After some campus-wide introspection and some additional data collection they completed on their own, the Sunny Glen College community concluded that its educational philosophy was appropriate and one they remained committed to, but that in practice there was a disconnect between the philosophy and actual, day-to-day campus life. They found that students were doing inadequate levels of serious independent work and that there was limited faculty advising. Even though students would report that they were having a positive experience at the institution, this had more to do with the fact that they were enjoying themselves and less about getting a good education. By participating in the CLA, which served as a systematic assessment of student performance with measures that could be benchmarked against other schools, the campus received a “reality check” on the degree to which it was meeting its institutional goals.

The administration has already moved towards making more explicit its expectations and standards for members of the campus community (students, faculty, and administrators), encouraged more assessment and feedback to students, and facilitated the call for greater student effort. I am happy to report that Sunny Glen College plans to use the CLA measures again to chart the efficacy of these reform efforts.

The experience at Sunny Glen—and at other colleges and universities that have joined the growing number of CLA institutions—has been tremendously gratifying. Our motive for developing the CLA was to support colleges and universities in their efforts to improve undergraduate education through the use of direct measures of student learning outcomes, and this is exactly what is happening.

But while I’m tremendously proud of the work of the staff here in the CLA headquarters in New York, I’m equally in awe of the campus communities around the country like the one at Sunny Glen College that are accomplishing the thoughtful, analytical work needed to move forward, using the CLA data to inform and improve their own local programs, and asking the hard questions.

Roger Benjamin, Ph.D.

President

Council for Aid to Education

CLA AT A GLANCE

The Project

The Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) is a national effort that provides colleges and universities with information about how well their students are doing with respect to certain learning outcomes that almost all undergraduate institutions strive to achieve. This information is derived from tests that are administered to all or a sample of the institution's freshmen and seniors.

The CLA Approach

The CLA focuses on how well the school as a whole contributes to student development. Consequently, it uses the institution (rather than the individual student) as the primary unit of analysis. It does this by measuring the "value added" an institution provides where value added is defined in two ways, namely:

"Deviation Scores" indicate the degree to which a school's students earn higher or lower scores than would be expected where the expectation is based on (1) the students' admissions test scores (i.e., ACT or SAT scores) and (2) the typical relationship between admission scores and CLA scores across all of the participating institutions. In other words, how well do the

students at a school do on the CLA tests relative to the scores earned by "similar students" (in terms of entrance examination scores) at other colleges and universities?

"Difference Scores" contrast the performance of freshmen with seniors. Specifically, after holding admissions scores constant, do an institution's seniors earn significantly higher scores than do its freshmen and most importantly, is this difference larger or smaller than that observed at other colleges?

No testing program can assess all the knowledge, skills, and abilities that colleges endeavor to develop in their students. Consequently, the CLA focuses on some of the areas that are an integral part of most institutions' mission statements, namely: critical thinking, analytic reasoning, problem solving, and written communication.

Major Funders

Carnegie Corporation of New York
William and Flora Hewlett Foundation
Ford Foundation
Lumina Foundation
Christian A. Johnson Endeavor Foundation
Teagle Foundation

Studies that measure the value added of college are the gold standard of higher education assessment. The CLA is taking a most valuable step in the right direction.

Dr. Earnest Pascarella

Mary Louise Peterson Professor of Higher Education, University of Iowa

Participating Colleges & Universities

Since its inception in 2002, 134 colleges and universities have participated in the CLA, including five consortia that have used CLA data for benchmarking and comparative analyses. Over 100 institutions have already registered for the 2005–06 academic year administration of the CLA. We maintain confidentiality of all participating institutions; results that identify any given institution are only reported back to that institution, with the exception of consortia of institutions that agree to share data with each other.

Administration

CLA administration, scoring, and score reporting are paperless. The CLA is administered over the Internet to students who take the measures online at a proctored computer lab (or other Internet-enabled site) on their campus. Answers are uploaded and distributed to readers over the Internet who evaluate them online. Students receive their scores online as well.

Validity and Reliability

The CLA measures were designed by nationally recognized experts in psychometrics and assessment, and field tested in order to ensure the highest levels of validity and reliability. For more information contact the CLA staff.

Cost

Cross-Sectional (\$6,300 per year): Institutions assess 100 first-year students in the fall and 100 seniors in the spring.

Longitudinal (\$28,000 over four years): Institutions assess 300 first-year students three times during their college careers.

Over-sampling students is also possible in order to enable additional, within-campus analyses.

Learning More

To learn more about the CLA, please visit our website at www.cae.org/cla. You can also sign up to participate in a free monthly CLA Web Conference, which will provide an overview of the project, as well as a preview of the CLA measures. For additional information, contact the staff at the CLA headquarters at 212.217.0700 or at cla@cae.org.

About CAE

The Council for Aid to Education (CAE) is a national 501(c)(3) organization based in New York City. CAE was initially established in 1952 to advance corporate support of education. Today, CAE conducts policy research, with a major focus on improving quality, access, and productivity in higher education.

CLA INSTRUMENTS

CLA Performance Tasks

Each CLA Performance Task requires students to use an integrated set of critical thinking, analytic reasoning, problem solving, and written communication skills to answer several open-ended questions about a hypothetical but realistic situation. In addition to directions and questions, each CLA Performance Task also has its own document library that includes a range of information sources, such as letters, memos, summaries of research reports, newspaper articles, maps, photographs, diagrams, tables, charts, and interview notes or transcripts. Students are instructed to use these materials in preparing their answers to the Performance Task's questions within the allotted 90 minutes.

The first portion of each CLA Performance Task contains general instructions and introductory material. The student is then presented with a split screen. On the right side of the screen is a list of the materials in the document library. The student selects a particular document to view by using a pull-down menu. On the left side of the screen are a question and a response box that has standard cut-and-paste functionality.

There is no limit on how much a student can type. When a student completes a question, he or she then selects the next question in the queue. Some of these components are illustrated in the box below.

Sample CLA Performance Task

You advise Pat Williams, the president of DynaTech, a company that makes precision electronic instruments and navigational equipment. Sally Evans, a member of DynaTech's sales force, recommended that DynaTech buy a small private plane (a SwiftAir 235) that she and other members of the sales force could use to visit customers. Pat was about to approve the purchase when there was an accident involving a SwiftAir 235.



Your document library contains the following materials:

1. Newspaper article about the accident
2. Federal Accident Report on in-flight breakups in single-engine planes
3. Internal Correspondence (Pat's e-mail to you & Sally's e-mail to Pat)
4. Charts relating to SwiftAir's performance characteristics
5. Excerpt from magazine article comparing SwiftAir 235 to similar planes
6. Pictures and descriptions of SwiftAir Models 180 and 235

Sample Questions: Do the available data tend to support or refute the claim that the type of wing on the SwiftAir 235 leads to more in-flight breakups? What is the basis for your conclusion? What other factors might have contributed to the accident and should be taken into account? What is your preliminary recommendation about whether or not DynaTech should buy the plane and what is the basis for this recommendation?

No two CLA Performance Tasks assess the same combination of abilities. Some ask students to identify and then compare and contrast the strengths and limitations of alternative hypotheses, points of view, courses of action, etc. To perform these and other tasks, students may have to weigh different types of evidence, evaluate the credibility of various documents, spot possible bias or inconsistencies, and identify questionable or critical assumptions.

A CLA Performance Task also may ask students to suggest or select a course of action to resolve conflicting or competing strategies and then provide a rationale for that decision, including why it is likely to be better than one or more other approaches. For example, students may be asked to anticipate potential difficulties or hazards that are associated with different ways of dealing with a problem including the likely short- and long-term consequences and implications of these strategies. Students may then be asked to suggest and defend one or more of these approaches. Alternatively, students may be asked to review a collection of materials or a set of options, analyze and organize them on multiple dimensions, and then defend that organization.

The CLA Performance Tasks often require students to marshal evidence from different sources; distinguish rational from emotional arguments and fact from opinion; understand data in tables and figures; deal with inadequate, ambiguous, and/or conflicting information; spot deception and holes in the arguments made by others; recognize information that is and is not relevant to the task at hand; identify additional information that would help to resolve issues; and weigh, organize, and synthesize information from several sources.

All of the CLA Performance Tasks require students to present their ideas clearly, including justifying the basis for their points of view. For example, they might note the specific ideas or sections in the document library that support their position and describe the flaws or shortcomings in the arguments underlying alternative approaches.

Analytic Writing Tasks

Students write answers to two types of essay prompts, namely: a “Make-an-Argument” question that asks them to support or reject a position on some issue; and a “Critique-an-Argument” question that asks them to evaluate the validity of an argument made by someone else. Both of these tasks measure a student’s ability to articulate complex ideas, examine claims and evidence, support ideas with relevant reasons and examples, sustain a coherent discussion, and use standard written English.

“Make-an-Argument” Analytic Writing Task

prompts typically present an opinion on some issue and ask students to address this issue from any perspective they wish, so long as they provide relevant reasons and examples to explain and support their views. Students have 45 minutes to complete this essay. For example, they might be asked to explain why they agree or disagree with the following:

There is no such thing as “truth” in the media. The one true thing about the information media is that it exists only to entertain.

“Critique-an-Argument” Analytic Writing Tasks

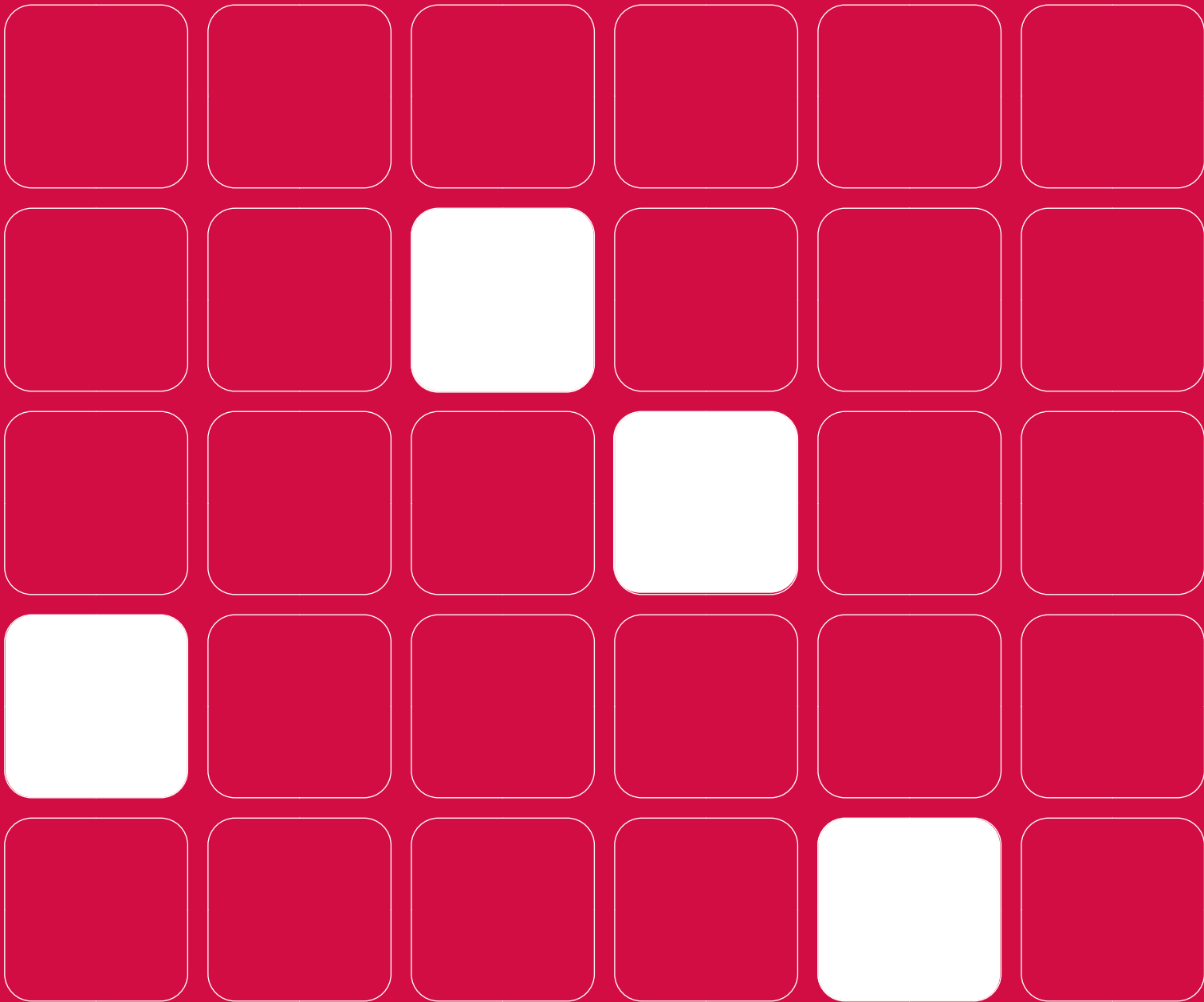
ask students to critique an argument by discussing how well reasoned they find it to be (rather than simply agreeing or disagreeing with the position presented). For example, they might be asked to evaluate the following argument:

A well-respected professional journal with a readership that includes elementary school principals recently published the results of a two-year study on childhood obesity. (Obese individuals are usually considered to be those who are 20 percent above their recommended weight for height and age.) This study sampled 50 schoolchildren, ages 5-11, from Smith Elementary School. A fast food restaurant opened near the school just before the study began. After two years, students who remained in the sample group were more likely to be overweight—relative to the national average. Based on this study, the principal of Jones Elementary School decided to confront her school’s obesity problem by opposing any fast food restaurant openings near her school.

Evidence-based reasoning is one of the most important outcomes of a good liberal education. By focusing on students’ analytical integrative and communication abilities, the CLA will help campuses tie their assessment programs to intellectual gains that have lasting value -- both for students and for a knowledge-intensive society.

Dr. Carol Geary Schneider

President, Association of American Colleges and Universities



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